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Verizon replacement sought
in Speech-to-Speech service

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The Public Utilities Commission is drafting a request for a telephone relay service that Verizon Hawaii has been providing for hearing- and speech-impaired residents. Verizon has informed the PUC that it will stop handling the Speech-to-Speech Telephone Relay Service as soon as another company is found to take it over.

Assistive Technology Resource Centers of Hawaii, which works with disabled residents, asked the PUC last month to investigate Verizon Hawaii's alleged failure to provide adequate speech-to-speech telephone services. It asked the PUC to refund or roll back surcharges paid by all telephone subscribers for "a service that can't be used by those who are supposed to benefit from it."

The surcharge was raised to 17 cents from 7 cents per access line per month in January of last year.

"It was interesting," said Barbara Fischlowitz-Leong, executive director of the Assistive Technology Resource Centers. "There was a request for an investigation, and all of a sudden they drop out."

Verizon Hawaii has been under fire from the organization because of complaints about its services, provided under a contract with AT&T. Instead of using local operators, AT&T uses operators in Virginia who do not understand pidgin, ethnic dialects or Hawaiian names, users have complained.

Verizon Hawaii spokeswoman Ann Nishida said the speech-to-speech call volume has been very low and that there is not enough data to speculate why the service is not being used.

Also, she said, "Verizon Hawaii has not received any complaints about the STS service from any end user."

She said Verizon is giving up the STS business because its equipment cannot accommodate potential new Federal Communications Commission requirements for the service.

The Assistive Technology Resource Centers said residents were not using the service because of delays getting connections and difficulties with the communications assistants.

The federally mandated system is intended to allow an estimated 1,000 islanders with diseases or injuries impairing speech to call 711 toll-free and give the operator the number they want. They can use their voice, a voice prosthesis, communication device or an aide.

PUC attorney Kris Nakagawa said the staff is drafting a request for services for a new provider within 90 days. It is also investigating the informal complaint against Verizon Hawaii, he said.

Fischlowitz-Leong said Sprint was here last month promoting its services for 200 to 300 people involved with the disabled community and indicated it would respond to the PUC's request.